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DISCUSSION

THE RECITATION AS A MEANS OF TRAINING IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

Is the public-speaking department as it is now organized in our high schools, with its course offered as an elective, giving satisfactory results?

It has been my observation that the pupils choosing the subject of public speaking are the ones whose tastes lead them to the choice, and that as a result pupils who are backward in expression are pushed still farther into the background as those who are working in this department become the leaders, not only in debate, extempore speech-making, and oratorical contests, but in the daily recitation as well. But, you say, if this department is accomplishing so much for its pupils, does this not bespeak greater commendation for it? It does that. The object of this paper is not to decry any good that is being done in any department, but to present existing conditions surrounding the pupils whose timidity leads them to shun the work in the public-speaking department, and to offer some suggestions to remedy the difficulty.

I have recently visited a number of high schools, and I found in all of them the same lack of freedom in expression among pupils in the daily recitation, an inability to talk at any length upon a topic of the lesson. Is it because pupils cannot learn to express themselves with ease and fluency, or is it because they have not the requisite training for these accomplishments? I am convinced that the latter is the case in far too many instances.

Let us look at prevailing methods in the ordinary high school and in many high schools of high standard. The word *method*, however, is hardly applicable to much of our high-school teaching. The elementary teachers have a great advantage over the high-school teachers, for the training schools give them a foundation at least upon which they may build method and purpose, while the high-school teachers go fresh from college into their teaching and must work out their own salvation. Perhaps after some years, if these college graduates have a professional spirit and a liking for their work, they will have evolved methods with definite purposes. But the chances are that most of them will drift from day to day with no plans and no ideals, and will never see pupil and subject in their proper relation. And this not because they are unwilling to be pedagogical, but because they are handicapped by college methods which, as they soon learn, do not fit in with high-school possibilities, and because there is no one in the school to give any helpful suggestions.

In almost every classroom there exist the following conditions: the teacher aggressively in the foreground, the activity of the class coming almost

wholly from his words or personality; pupils reciting from their seats, either in standing or sitting position; questions put by teacher with shorter or longer answers from pupils; occasional outside information read from papers by pupils standing or sitting at their seats. And many times I have known teachers to occupy period after period with a continuous talk, taking the time which should be given to their pupils for the very thing they are doing.

Our methods are seriously at fault when the teacher is continually in the foreground and the pupil in the background; when the teacher gets the training which should be given to his pupils. A skilful teacher is a guiding spirit, and will so conduct his class that his pupils more than he will grow in initiative, self-reliance, and ease of expression. More often than not he will put himself in the position of an accompanist, who assists and supports, but who does not come into the foreground of the performance.

Are there not, then, some methods on which one may rely to correct these serious defects? I believe there are, and that the elements of public speaking, so far as they teach confidence, initiative, poise, and ease of expression, may be woven into the daily recitation by methods which will give to the pupils a training they are now failing to receive and of which they stand sorely in need. A few suggestions will put a clever teacher at work upon the problem, and he can soon evolve much that will fit his own particular needs and those of his pupils.

You are teaching a classic, and you think you must be the one to present the questions; but you may be surprised to find how well a chairman appointed from the class and sitting in your place at the desk will conduct that same recitation. Give him fair warning and good time for preparation for the day's presiding; the class will lose nothing, and he will gain initiative that he would not have gained in a year of answering questions from his seat.

Most of our pupils are poor readers, and by the time they are young men and women are so far removed from the practice of oral reading that they are afraid to utter a sentence. Oral reading, with the pupil in front of the class and special attention given to standing position, inflection, and general manner, will give a training for which no amount of poured-in information will compensate.

Let outside information be brought to the class, but do not let it be read from a paper poorly organized or poorly written. Show your pupils how to make an outline and how to build material on to that outline, and then let them give their information to the class in the form of a talk. If the talk is logical, as it will be, built upon an outline, the class will have little difficulty in taking notes, as it will be given slowly and in simple, easy language. Main heads of the outline may be put on the board, as may also any difficult words that occur in the report.

Oral composition may be handled in the same way. The pupil will do best to work up his composition on a simple outline, and come out before the class to give it.

There is everything in favor of the recitation with the pupil before the class, and nothing in favor of it with the pupil at his seat. The short time it takes for a pupil to pass down the aisle to a place before his audience may easily and profitably be taken. And the satisfaction and profit will not all accrue to the pupil from this method, for the teacher need not then wear himself out in vain effort to make the pupil stand up on both feet; nor will he have continually to say, "Talk louder, please." In front of the class, the pupil is in a position to be trained for correct standing-position and for a good manner in expressing what he has to say. I have seen the most diffident boys, who had come from a country-school training, grow in ability to express themselves, until they could talk from twenty to thirty minutes upon topics especially prepared and built upon an outline.

You are studying Shakespeare? By all means let your class dramatize the play after the critical study of it has ended. The front of your room can be the stage, with the aisles as entrances. The lines need not be committed, but may be read, and a great deal of sympathetic interpretation will fall into the production. This work will be spontaneous, for the pupils delight in it.

These methods need not be confined to the English department alone. In history and in civics much the same methods may be used, and the teacher who thinks he is not having the proper recitation unless he is presenting puzzling questions to his class, day after day, should pause and ask himself the question, What qualities am I developing in my pupils that will stand the test in the years that follow?

Where shall our pupils learn poise if not in their educational training? Habits grow fixed, self-consciousness comes on apace, and by the time a pupil has reached the Senior year of the high school it is very difficult to get him on his feet before a class to give public expression to his ideas. The methods suggested in this paper should be introduced in the ninth grade and continued throughout the four-year course, so that pupils when they leave the high school may be equipped with a fair degree of self-confidence and ease in public speaking.

I do not believe that the quiz method should be wholly discarded, but it should find a proportionate place in the daily recitation. We need the analytic work, and the pupil should by all means have ample opportunity to use in full his powers of analysis; but I believe that carefully worked-out plans and purposes on the part of the teacher will settle most of the difficulties now facing us and give to our high-school pupils a better-rounded plan of self-development.

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